

Blood Is Thicker

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Ino meets someone she was never supposed to know existed. Unfortunately, she's a natural. What's worse, she's sane. And it spreads.

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Blood Is Thicker

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1

It all started innocently enough. Yamanaka Inoichi came home tired and satisfied; between interrogation and therapy, he preferred the latter. No matter how horrible the stories he had to listen to, healing was a greater accomplishment than inflicting them. The capstone to the day was entering his house to hear his four-year-old daughter giggle. That was why he did this job day after day-to keep her safe.

"He called me a bad word, so I kicked him between the legs!" she crowed. Inoichi smiled a little, his daughter was turning out to be a little hellcat already, she'd make a fine ninja. He relaxed, allowing himself to enjoy the sound of her telling her mother about her day.

"Good job, Ino-chan! You should always hurt people who are mean to you." Inoichi blanched. *He knew that voice!* In a blink, he was at the doorway to the main room and what he found chilled his blood. His daughter had a huge smile on her face, a juicebox in one hand, and lollipop in the other-that wasn't a problem; the problem was that she was sitting on the lap of a man who could be his twin, save for a thin scar running from where his eye met his cheekbone down to the back of his jaw.

"You." Inoichi tried to get himself back under control. "You're not allowed here!"

"Excuse me, Ino-chan." The man set her on her feet and rose, giving Inoichi a small smile. "How else was I supposed to meet my niece, big brother?"

"He tells great stories, daddy!"

"You're not allowed in the family compound, Jokuro," Inoichi hissed.

"Do you know, I had to hear that I had a niece from Anko-chan talking to someone? You didn't even tell me you had a cute, little daughter. That hurts." Jokuro placed a hand over his heart. "It makes me think you don't trust your little brother."

"I. Don't. Ino, go upstairs." The two brothers stared at each other until her footsteps disappeared. "Get out of my house."

"Alright, alright." Jokuro huffed as he headed for the door. "I can tell when I'm not wanted." He poked his head back around the doorframe. "Tell Ino-chan I'll see her again soon." A kunai sliced through the air just missing his eye as he moved. "Bye, big brother!" Inoichi held still, waiting for the cheerful ditty his brother was whistling to fade out.

~Blood~

"Daddy?"

Inoichi forced a smile on his face. That had been far too close for comfort. Why had Ino been smiling? "Yes, Ino?"

"When will Uncle Jokuro come back?"

That was unthinkable. "Never. You will *never* see him again." This had to be kept as an aberration.

"But I like him!" Ino shouted. Normally, this was enough for him to cave and give her what she wanted. He was a terrible father that way, but he loved seeing her smile. Not this time.

"No." He steeled his heart when the tears started to fall. Terror made it easy. "No. Go the fuck to your room." Inoichi never swore in front of his daughter, but he couldn't release the tension wrapping around his soul right now and he couldn't have kept the curse from his lips if he'd been thinking about it at all. Which was why he didn't really notice that his daughter had run instead to the kitchen. Didn't notice when his wife came in with a scowl on her normally-sweet face.

Didn't hear her demand to know what he was thinking until she'd taken a swing at him with a frying pan.

"Did you curse at Ino?" she snapped when he'd finally come out of his fugue.

"Jokuro was here."

The frying pan clattered on the wooden floor as her hands went to her mouth. "What? I thought he was banned from the compound!"

"He was- *is!* But he heard that I have a daughter."

"He knows about Ino?"

"Overheard Anko-san. He decided to meet her."

"Oh gods. What do we do, Inoichi?"

"Make sure this never happens again."

That should have been the end of it.

~Blood~

It wasn't.

~Blood~

A six-year-old Ino raced home from the Academy. It had been her first day and she was excited; she was on the road to being a ninja! She couldn't wait to tell her uncle! Of course, he knew, but that didn't mean he wouldn't let her tell him about it anyway. She wasn't entirely clear on why her parents didn't like Uncle Jokuro, but she'd grasped that she had to keep their meetings secret from the second time they met.

He'd just been sitting in her bedroom when she came home from the park, relaxing against the wall with that faint smile on his face. When

she went to call out to him, he'd motioned for silence and gestured for her to come sit beside him on the floor so he could tell her more stories. And so it went. At least once a week, she would come into her room and find her uncle waiting so he could talk to her. It was like having an imaginary friend-her playmates had those-but hers was real!

Today he wasn't sitting next to the window. He stood, eyes alight when she came in.

"Hello, little Ino-chan." He kept his voice low, but she could hear the affection in it. He'd always had to be quiet enough not to be overheard in a house of ninja, but she didn't think Uncle Jokuro was the type to shout anyway.

"Hi, Uncle Jokuro!" She ran to him and gave him a hug. "It was my first day of the Academy!" She was about to launch into telling him about the people she'd met when he held up a hand.

"I know that. And that's why we're going out to celebrate."

"I'm supposed to celebrate with mommy and daddy tonight."

"You'll be home around dinnertime, Ino-chan. Now come on, it's time for you to get to be part of my story."

"Can I really?"

"Of course. Come on." He picked her up and slipped out the window. He moved quickly and quietly along the side of the house and then over the wall to the street outside, where he set her on the ground and stuck his hands in his pockets, looking like a father out for a stroll with his daughter. To a casual observer, he looked like Inoichi; Ino's presence helped the impression.

~Blood~

Ibiki looked up from his paperwork. "What're you doing back Inoi..." he trailed off as he saw that smile. "Jokuro." His eyes moved from the man to the young girl who was the center of every picture in his colleague's office. "No..."

Ino tugged on Jokuro's sleeve. "Hey, who's that?"

"That's Morino Ibiki," replied Jokuro, not looking away from Ibiki's eyes.

"Teddybear-san?"

"Yep."

"Hi, Teddybear-san!"

Ibiki was still staring. "No. Jokuro. No."

"'No' what, Morino-san?" That smile was still on the man's face.

"You wouldn't. Not your niece. Not even you, Jokuro."

"'Wouldn't' *what*, Morino-san?" Jokuro's smile grew fractionally larger.

Ibiki took a deep breath. Then he closed his eyes and murmured an apology to his dear friend before turning and walking down the hall deeper into T&I.

~Blood~

Anko found herself lifted off her chair. "Ibiki, what the fuck?" It was a mark of her personality that she rarely used any honorific, even for a direct superior with whom she was personally close.

"I'm coming down with the flu," the man replied, his tone flat. "I couldn't make it in today, so you're in charge."

"What the fuck is Jokuro doing?" she demanded. "You never use that tone unless Jokuro is up to something."

"I. Have. The. Flu." Ibiki dropped her back into her seat and vacated her office with a rapidness not common in T&I outside of prisoner-riots.

"Seriously!" she shouted at his retreating back. Then she caught sight of the two figures walking along the hallway. "What are you doing back here Inoi-Jokuro. And that's..." Anko paled.

"Uncle? Who's that?"

"That's Crazy-Snake-chan. She's very good. And very pretty."

Anko shuddered a little. "You know something? I think I got Ibiki's flu." She coughed theatrically. "I better go home for some bed rest. I wasn't even here today." She hurried off, adding a few coughs now and again.

As they ventured deeper into the building and its underground complex, there was a mass exodus of employees who all came down with the flu and had to stay home. By the time they got to the prisoners they were headed for, there were no other employees in the building.

~Blood~WARNING TORTURE SCENE~Blood~

"Well, boys and girls," Jokuro's voice was upbeat and cheerful. "I have good news and better news!" The whimpers rose in volume. "The good news is that some of you are going to help my niece learn the trade. The *better* news is that all the supervisors have caught the flu today, so I've got no one watching over me!"

Whimpers from tortured throats somehow became actual (if quiet) pleas for a mercy they knew wouldn't come. Ino pointed at one man. "He's peeing his pants," she giggled, "can we use him first?"

"Sure, Ino-chan." Jokuro sauntered over to the cell and entered it, dragging the sobbing man from it, casually kicking at his hand where he clasped at a fellow prisoner. "None of that, boy-o, you're helping us at Ino-chan's request."

"Hey, Uncle Jokuro? Did that man come in here missing an arm?"

"Who? Oh, him. Yeah, he did. Why?"

Ino looked down sadly. "Oh." Then she brightened. "Could we maybe make him match?"

"Only if you don't learn properly with this one."

The young blonde's face took on a calculating expression. "Nah, better to learn properly."

"Good lass." Jokuro heaved the man into the restraints of what resembled a horizontal Saint Andrew's cross. He turned, opening his arms expansively to encompass the wall covered in a variety of sharp, blunt, pointed, serrated, and otherwise unfriendly instruments. "Before we delve into specialist tools, we will start with the basics." He looked over his shoulder, waiting for Ino to nod before facing her and continuing. "You can't rely on having these things with you in the field, so it's always good to know how to work with the things you *will* have." He drew a kunai from his holster. "The humble kunai is the first choice of most ninja and it's the same with us. Not only does it have a bladed edge and a stabbing tip, but it comes with a handle and a ring that are oh-so-useful to the technician in a hurry."

Jokuro flipped the kunai over, holding the blade pointed down from his hand and reached down, sliding the ring over one of the man's fingers. "Now, the simplest move is a quick wrist movement, like so." He twisted his wrist suddenly, causing the ring to twist as well. There was a cracking sound and the man screamed. "As long as you have the strength, you can do the right damage, but there's something elegant about the single motion." He held out the kunai to Ino. "You try."

As Ino fumbled slightly with grasping a weapon designed for the hands of an adult male, Jokuro's right hand fell to his side, index and middle fingers extending.

Ino managed to get the ring on the man's middle finger and made a frown of concentration as she was forced to grip the kunai with two hands, twisting too slowly; instead of a quick noise, there was a slow grinding as the bones cracked and then broke. Jokuro blinked and relaxed, his hand rising and clapping Ino on the shoulder. "Not a bad first attempt, Ino-chan."

"It didn't go right," she huffed. "But at least he made fun noises."

"That he did, Ino-chan. Now, try again."

~Blood~

Inoichi was approaching frantic. Ino wasn't at home. Of course, she liked to go to the park to play with the other children, but today had been her first day of the Academy and he'd been home early so that they could celebrate. She knew that, so she should have been here. *Maybe* she lost track of time, but he was feeling uneasy and getting worse as it got closer to sunset. He'd taken to standing by the door to the compound, looking both ways to try and spot her.

Off in the distance, a blonde figure turned the corner and Inoichi was down the road like a shot, skidding to a halt in front of his daughter. She looked unharmed, though he didn't recognize the small satchel over her shoulder. And there was a splash of blood on her cheek.

"Oh gods, Ino, are you okay?"

His little girl gave him a broad smile. "Of course, Daddy!"

He let out a sigh of relief. "Is that blood? Where'd it come from?"

Ino looked to the side of his head. "I was told not to tell you."

Inoichi froze. "What?"

"I was told not to tell you." There was an evasive inflection to her tone.

"Who told you not to tell me?"

"I was told not to tell-"

"Yes, yes. Ino, I'm your *father* ; tell me what happened."

"I was told not to tell you because you're a bitch."

Oh gods. He knew that phrase. "Was it Jokuro?"

"I was told not to tell you because you're a bitch."

Inoichi threw his hands up in the air, unwilling to delve into his daughter's mind; that was a level of violation he wouldn't inflict on his little girl. "Alright, it was Jokuro. What's in the satchel?"

"It's mine and I can't tell you what it is because you're a bitch."

"Jokuro gave it to you?"

"It's mine and you're a bitch." Ino's face was calm despite the harsh words.

Ino tried to stop her father from grabbing the contents of her bag, but he was a fully trained jōnin and she was a six-year-old who just started training. He snatched the kunai up and stared in horror at the blade which was covered in the flaky brownish-red of dried blood.

"Ino... what is this? This is sharp! You know you're not allowed sharpened kunai!"

"It's mine and you're a bitch."

"Not anymore, it isn't. Now go to your room."

"It's *mine!* "

"Like I said, not anymore. Now go the fuck to your room before you get the first spanking of your life." Inoichi didn't like snapping at his daughter, but his brother was a presence he didn't want in *his* life, let alone hers.

"I'm telling him you stole it!"

"I don't care. Now. Go. The. Fuck. To. Your. Room!"

"You'll be sorry." Ino stormed off, face fixed in rage.

~Blood~

Morino Ibiki answered the hammering knock at his door with a blade in his hand. "If this isn't a summons from the Hokage himself, I'm going to gut you and use your intestines for a jumpro-Inoichi-san... what are you doing here?"

"Just coming by to check on a sick colleague," replied the man brightly. "I stopped by the office to see if I could find someone and I found the place was completely empty. No guards, no interrogators, no staff at all. Funny thing, that. Though there was a man with his throat cut lying on the floor by the wastepaper basket. He'd had a *rough day*."

"I have the flu."

"That's amazing. Do you know that Mitirashi-san said the same thing?"

"I must have given it to her."

"Yes, she told me that too." Inoichi reached out and grasped Ibiki's undershirt, dragging him close (and down, since the man was a head taller than the Yamanaka clan leader). "You *sure* it's the flu? It wasn't just that someone saw a *certain someone* wandering around with, I'm just pulling this idea out of my ass here, *my daughter?* "

Ibiki coughed theatrically. "Definitely the flu. You are a friend and colleague, Inoichi-san, so I will say this nicely: let go."

Inoichi shoved the man back. "Your cowardice disgusts me."

~Blood~

Ino wasn't surprised to find Jokuro sitting in her room two days later. It would have been reasonable to expect that her father had ordered her uncle away and possibly invoked his authority as head of the clan to enforce it; but Ino knew better. Uncle Jokuro did as he liked.

"Hey there, Ino-chan."

"Daddy tell you to stay away from me?"

"He wasn't nearly so polite, but yes. I do believe he was rather upset about our celebration."

Ino shrugged. "He took away my kunai."

"That wasn't nice of him. He hasn't stepped up patrols in the compound, so I guess he doesn't know where we meet."

"He didn't ask."

Jokuro shook his head. "Clumsy, big brother, very clumsy. Well, his failure makes my life easy. How was your day, Ino-chan?"

"I found some interesting people! They're just the kind you told me to look for, too!"

"Oh? So soon?"

"Mhmm! And I even rescued one of them from bullies today!"

He gave a slow, quiet series of claps. "Well *done*, Ino-chan. That's impressive. Tell me about them."

"The one I saved is Haruno Sakura," Ino's face took on an expression of great concentration. "Parents are merchant civilians; no known ninja ancestors or relatives. She's smart, but doesn't think she's pretty or that anyone will like her. People were mocking the size of her forehead after classes today, but I made them leave her alone." A single eyebrow raise prompted further explanation. "I kicked one between his legs and told them to back off. I was late today because I walked her home." He nodded. "The other one is Hyūga Hinata. I haven't spoken to her yet, but she has a complete lack of self-worth and clearly thinks she's a burden to everyone around her."

"Good, good. Your second shinobi assignment is already complete and you've barely started at the Academy. That, Ino-chan, deserves a reward."

"Can we go back to the fun place again?" Ino's eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Not today. Best to give them a little time to recover. But I was thinking that with all the skill you've shown, you should learn some of the family techniques."

"Daddy says I'm not ready to learn them yet." When he merely raised an eyebrow again, Ino went on, "but he's a bitch."

"That's my girl." He held up one hand. "I'm going to teach you the way I wish I'd been taught. We're going to skip the usual handsigns and go straight to my preference for how to do this." He let his arm fall, and two fingers casually made half of what was normally used to perform the Yamanaka techniques. "When you officially learn, you'll find out how to do it their way. Besides, what we're learning today are two specialist jutsu I created myself."

Ino's eyes brightened as she dove into the lesson.

(A/N John)

And this is the first chapter of *Blood Is Thicker* . We have had this one in the works for literally a year or more. The document has been sitting on my hard drive for six months. But it was time to give in to Spoon's whinging and publish a chapter.

(A/N 2 John)

As stated in *Itachi*, I break with my own preferences here and made use of an original character. He is not the only one who appears in this tale. The fact is that Jokuro was created as the jōnin-sensei of a team I made a couple years ago when Spoon was getting into making OCs. As usual, I managed to start with a basic idea and end up with some dangerously insane results. I love my little psychopaths, though. Rejects and maniacs all.

(A/N 3 John)

And yes, if you hadn't guessed, we have managed to have three stories with Hyūga Hinata as a merciless killer and yet in each, she is different from the others. I'm glad about that. Besides, the world needs more #Baddass!Hinata in it.

(A/N 4 John)

Honestly, I don't expect to publish this one quickly because I really want to get more done in *Itachi* and there's still *FMB* that needs work and some day I may return to *Weasleys of the Corn* and there's a prequel to write.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Inoichi looked up from his desk to see a frowning chūnin. He liked to think of himself as aware of his fellow ninja, but the fact was that there were too many genin and chūnin for him to recognize all of them on sight. This one, however, he knew from annual meetings to review progress. "Umino-san, may I ask to why you're visiting me in T&I during the school day?"

"We need to talk, Yamanaka-san." Something about the man's scarred face was making Inoichi nervous. "I'm afraid there has been an incident."

Inoichi was on his feet. "What happened to Ino!" The question came out as a shouted demand.

"Nothing happened to Ino," Iruka said, his tone only touch placating.

"What?"

Umino Iruka sat down in the chair on the far side of Inoichi's desk. "Sit down, Yamanaka-san. I have had a trying day and it's not yet time for kunai practice." The tone the chūnin used had the inflection of teacherly authority and Inoichi found his legs automatically folding under him. "Good. I'm going to explain events as best as I understand them, given the... questionable nature of the testimony."

" *Testimony?* "

"Yes. At approximately 0800 hours, a girl by the name of Gotumo Momata was discourteous to a fellow Academy student, Haruno Sakura, upsetting her greatly. Your daughter, who is very close to Haruno-san, was upset as well. She took it upon herself to grab Gotumo-san and drag her into a supply closet." Iruka's eyes narrowed. "We might not have learned about this if an instructor had

not passed by the door and heard muffled whimpering and your daughter telling someone that if they insulted Haruno-san, your daughter would 'make her disappear'. Yamanaka Ino was found with her victim tied to a chair, a cloth over her face, and a bucket of water being poured over it." Inoichi froze. "It is admirable that your daughter is so protective of her comrades, but I must ask you why you instructed a nine-year-old girl in your..." Iruka glanced around with a distasteful expression, "... skills."

Inoichi's face was a blank mask. "I understand, Umino-san. I will be having a long *discussion* with my daughter and I will ensure that she delivers a full apology."

"That last part will not be possible. Gotumo-san has withdrawn from the Academy effective immediately and has insisted in the most heartfelt, pleading terms, that she never have any sort of interaction with your daughter again."

"I see. If you will excuse me, Umino-san? I believe I have a meeting I must attend before school lets out."

~Blood~

"Hello, big broth-" Jokuro leaned back out of the way of a swinging fist, letting it strike the prisoner strung against the wall. "If you wanted to beat on a prisoner, all you had to do was ask!"

"I do *not* want to hit prisoners!" Inoichi's voice was a snarl of rage. "I want to know what you've been teaching my daughter!"

"Little Ino-chan? Has something happened?"

"She waterboarded a fellow student!"

"Oh my. How is this my fault, though?"

"You taught her!"

"I couldn't, big brother. I hardly have time for work, what with my genin team. Besides, you have her watched, even when she trains in the forest."

"How do you know that? I told you to stay away from her!"

"Well, I was feeling a little naughty, so I thought I'd visit my cute niece, but there was a clansman sitting in a tree, watching. I feel like you don't trust me, big brother."

"I *don't* !"

"That's just hurtful."

"If you didn't teach her, how did she learn to waterboard someone?"

"You're overlooking the obvious, you know."

"What's that?"

Jokuro smiled broadly. "That your daughter is a natural." He winked at his brother. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to torture this man for... something." Jokuro frowned. "I don't remember what it was. He has some secret or another that we want. Well, I'll just torture him until he tells me all his secrets." The smile was back, causing Inoichi's stomach to lurch, already sickened by Jokuro's assertion.

"You know something?" Jokuro sounded conversational now, slight upbeat and friendly. "I think he looks like a tough sort of fellow," he raised his voice slightly to be heard over the gibbering denials of knowledge. "But since his life is coming to an end, I'm sure he's thinking of his wife and daughter, aren't you?" Jokuro patted the man's cheek. "Don't worry. They're perfectly safe, tied up in my office. But you won't break easily, so I should find out if either of them know anything." Inoichi's face went from pale to ashen. "Or maybe you just need some motivation? Killing one of them should work; I'll let you pick: wife or daughter."

"T-to I-live?" the man whimpered.

"Possibly. Or possibly I'm asking the opposite. That's what makes this an interesting choice for you."

"You can't kill civilians!" hissed Inoichi, who was looking distinctly ill.

"Of course I can, big brother. I mean, sure, it's against the rules and everything, but it's just a slap-on-the-wrist offense for me. And paperwork." Jokuro walked around his brother and leaned out the door. "Oi! Ibiki! I need form 16-F!"

"Oh fuck, Jokuro," came the shouted reply. "Why are you killing a second person today?"

"Because it's fun?" Jokuro ducked back inside and sidled over to his prisoner. "Now, have you made your choice?"

"M-m-my daughter..."

"You're a cold man, you know. Most men would want their daughter to live. I guess you figure if you survive, you'll get the chance to make more? If you'll excuse me, I have to go get her. She should see you so she knows who you picked." Jokuro picked up a notebook and began to scribble down everything the man babbled in a stream of pleas and information. When the man ground to a halt, Jokuro smiled. "See? That wasn't so hard-shame it took you so long. I should go get your family so you can explain to your wife why she's watching your daughter have her throat slit in front of you." Jokuro left the room, whistling a jaunty tune, followed by his elder brother, who looked torn between horror and evacuating his stomach.

"You're going to kill a girl after her father gave you everything?" he croaked.

"Of course not, big brother. We don't even have them in custody."

"You were *bluffing* ? What about that form?"

"Oh that's just a little game between me and Ibiki. Don't worry, though, we're searching for his kin right now. I'd hate to be made a liar. Do give Ino-chan my best and congratulate her on her obvious natural talent." Jokuro waved to his brother's hastily retreating form.

"Wait! What do you mean *your genin*? "

~Blood~

Sarutobi Hiruzen looked up from the endless supply of paperwork that made up much of his existence when his secretary entered his office. She was a bright spot in his stressful life; a very pretty young woman who understood the idea of loose dress standards. "Sorry to interrupt, Hokage-sama, but you have a meeting now."

"No I don't. I scheduled this time for paperwork."

"Yamanaka Inoichi is fairly certain."

"Oh. One of *those* meetings."

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

"Send him in, then."

His secretary bowed just enough to give him a pleasant view down her top before turning and ushering Inoichi into the office. It was a tactic his amazing aide had developed to ensure that he at least began meetings in a happy state of mind. It tended to reduce the amount of shouting he did.

"Inoichi," Sarutobi's smile was genuine for the moment. "I trust that something of monumental import has taken place. Because as good a mood as I'm in, I have a great deal of paperwork to do. So please make it quick."

"You're giving Jokuro a genin team?"

"Oh." The Hokage sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I gather you found out?"

"He just mentioned it to me while threatening to kill a prisoner's daughter in front of him."

"Please tell me he didn't do it this time."

"No, he didn't. Don't change the subject."

"Well, Inoichi, the thing is that I'm *not* giving Jokuro a genin team."

"Thank the gods."

"I gave them to him two years ago." Inoichi's mouth worked, but nothing came out. "I didn't really have many options. The three of them were such pariahs that no jōnin-sensei would take them on. I asked for volunteers and Jokuro was the most senior. I even have a recommendation from Morino Ibiki saying that it would be fine if Jokuro didn't come in to work as often."

"But... but... it's *Jokuro*, Hokage-sama. Why would you expose three young minds to him?"

"Well, I understand that you exposed your daughter to him when she was much younger than graduates." He pointedly ignored Inoichi's stricken expression. "Besides, you're thinking of this in the wrong way, Inoichi. If he's busy training those three students of his, that's time you don't fear him teaching your daughter anything that might cause a repeat of today's incident. We wouldn't want that, would we?"

"No, Hokage-sama." Inoichi's face showed his self-loathing. He couldn't believe that he was withdrawing his objection to letting his monstrous sibling train three young minds just to keep the man away from his precious daughter.

~Blood~

"Hey, Uncle Jokuro!" Ino looked up when her favorite person in the world slipped into her clearing. It had been her idea to establish a clearing out in the woods as her site for training. With its secluded location, the only observer was the Yamanaka clansman she locked in a mind-trap the moment she got there. When she finished, she would implant the memories of her training alone or with her friends, just like always.

"Hey, Ino-chan. I hear you dealt with a troublemaker at school."

"Yeah. But Iruka made me stop before I'd finished." Ino scowled.
"He's a bitch."

"He really is. I could pay him a visit, if you like."

"No, Uncle Jokuro. If you do, he might realize we're meeting. He isn't stupid, just a bitch."

Jokuro shrugged, as if he didn't quite follow why this was a problem, then turned to the other girls in the clearing. "Sakura-chan, Hinata-chan."

"Hey, Jokuro-sensei."

Sakura turned to Ino. "Why didn't you let us help you with that bitch earlier?" she demanded.

Ino sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. "Because as long as it's just me, it can be written off as me manifesting traits similar to Uncle Jokuro in defense of a friend. Once the two of you get involved, suddenly it looks like we're up to something." She looked over at Hinata. "Has your father been difficult recently?"

"He is still disappointed in my 'lack of progress'," Hinata smiled faintly. "But I *am* the heiress and he cannot bring himself to replace mother. There will be no competition."

"You've checked on the grades?"

"Yes, Ino-sama. Sakura remains at the top of the class."

"Why *am* I at the top of the class instead of you two?"

"Sakura." Ino shook her head, a teacher disappointed by a pupil. "My team is already set. We know that unless I do something bad enough to reach the general community, I'm going to be teamed with Shikamaru and Choji. Their parents are good friends with my..." her expression turned distasteful, "father."

"And I've been playing the weakling too long to change now," put in Hinata. "If I did, someone might start asking questions about our training sessions out here. We don't really want that, do we?"

"Don't forget, Sakura, no matter how much he tries, Uzumaki is going to be dead last. And he's enamored with you."

"And I've been cultivating that, just like you taught me, Ino."

" *And ?*"

"I have been working on Uchiha Sasuke as well. It's tricky. I am unsure if he dislikes females, people, or is just suffering residual trauma from his family's annihilation."

"Probably the last two." Ino turned to Jokuro. "When's the rest of the family due?"

"Right now, little sister." A voice sounded from a tree overhead. "You're still not alert enough." The owner of the voice dropped to the ground in a crouch before standing. She was a thin girl, just coming into her bloom late and still a bit coltish, body a bit too lean. What could be seen of her face behind the curtain of near-white hair was fine-boned and might have even been pretty, had it not been for the blindfold over her eyes. Despite her lack of vision, she moved with assurance, her still-maturing body able to keep steady, her gestures controlled and precise. She wore a flak jacket over a black tank-top that bared more alabaster skin and revealed that she was yet to fully

come into womanhood. Loose hakama of a similar blackness, kunai pouch on either hip. Long, thin fingers were wrapped in tape that wound around her hands and up her forearms to trail loosely from just before her elbows.

"Rei!" Ino's smile was warm and, after a few moments, the new girl's pale lips managed an approximation of one in return. "The others are right behind you?"

"Of course."

Ino turned to a different part of the forest. "Come on out, you two!"

From the trees stepped a young man dressed in what could be described as standard-shinobi. Leggings taped to the knees, long-sleeve shirt taped on the forearms, kunai and shuriken pouches. Despite his youth, he was already taller and broader than Rei and was still growing, he lacked her grace and her leanness, his body corded with wiry muscle. Flinty eyes observed the clearing with a hungry glint. When he smiled, pointed teeth gleamed.

Moments later, an overcoat emerged from the trees as well. There were a pair of legs poking out from the bottom of it and a pair of black sunglasses and black hair above the turned-up collar, but that was about as much as was possible to discern. "It is good to return to the Hive." The voice was soft and smooth, sounding distinctly older than Rei. There was a hint of coldness, but only a hint.

"Kanza, Inna!"

The young man grabbed Ino up into a hug. "It's good to be with the family again."

All of them gathered around as Jokuro dragged a whimpering figure from the bushes. "Now, remind me whose turn it is this time."

~Blood~

Iruka looked at the group of gleaming headbands with their attached graduates. It was a satisfying way to end the school year, seeing the number of his charges who had succeeded in meeting the requirements set for them. There was the painful knowledge that most of them would die within the next two years, but he'd done the best he could to prepare them. This was up to their team leaders and their own ingenuity.

"Congratulations everyone. Each one of you has taken the first true step on your journey as shinobi. Many of you will die soon, but those of you who do not will go on to become valuable members of our village. In a moment, you will receive your team assignments, but this is my last chance to lecture you and there are some things you need to be told.

"We leave a lot out of the Academy. There isn't enough time to teach you everything and not everyone has sufficient aptitude to learn everything anyway. What you gained over the last several years has been the basic tools that every shinobi needs. No matter what you choose to learn from here, you have been prepared with the foundation on which to work. Most of you have adopted a work-ethic that will see you in good stead through the remainder of your careers. Some of you coasted through on natural talent or brilliance. At least one of you graduated through a combination of raw determination and obscene luck.

"Your team leaders are jōnin. They are experts in multiple fields and are blooded many times over. You will obey them as though their mouths speak with the Hokage's voice. They will work you hard and teach you to do things that seem pointless. Your place is not to question; your place is to do as they tell you. It is your duty as genin to inform them of specializations you wish to work on. Expect them to test you for ability. If you fail their tests, you will have to wait until they are satisfied or you have been promoted to chūnin. Only if they do not test you at all may you come to me and I will see to it that you are given a chance.

"Now that you understand that you are being sent into hell, let's get to the assigning of teams."

~Blood~

"Ino, where are we going?" Choji was huffing as he jogged to keep up with the blonde who had promptly taken charge of their team the moment Sarutobi-sensei had dismissed them.

"Don't ask stupid questions," she snapped.

Shikamaru had a suspicion about where they were headed, but kept his mouth shut to prolong the time that he could remain ignorant of it.

"See?" Ino said a short time later. "We're here."

"I-I-Ino... th-this is T-T and I." Choji quailed under the harsh glare she fixed him with; there was something a bit wild in the blue there that made him lose his appetite for the moment.

"Well observed. Come on!" She marched into the building as though she had every right to be there. Most of the ninja seemed to agree. Certainly, they didn't interfere as she led the way through winding passages until they were stopped by Ibiki.

"Yamanaka-san," he murmured, looking at the two following in her wake. "You aren't..."

"Aren't what, Teddybear-san?"

"Please..."

"Please *what*, Teddybear-san?"

"Fuck this. I have the flu." Ibiki stormed off, his face a rictus of terror and fury.

"He sometimes comes down with sudden bouts of illness," Ino explained to her teammates. She took them into the bowels of the

dungeons, physically dragging them when they froze at the sounds of anguished screams.

"Hey, Uncle Jokuro!"

"Are these the newbies?"

"Yep."

Shikamaru and Choji shrank back at the broad smile on Jokuro's face.

~Blood~

Shikaku was a bit worried. Shikamaru's first day as a ninja should have been over by now. There was always the highly unlikely chance that their team failed the test, but either way... it was going on five in the evening and no sign of him. He wasn't the type to stand at the door, though; he sat in the living room, drinking some tea and letting his mind tick over the events of the day. There was the calming background noise of Yoshino in the kitchen and the general chatter of the clan.

None of that meant that when Shikamaru entered the front door, he wasn't standing up and moving to greet his son. What he found was a blank-eyed twelve-year-old with an expressionless mask on his face. The bottom of Shikaku's stomach dropped. "Are you okay?" he asked, kneeling to put himself at eye-level with his child.

"I am fine." Shikamaru's voice was far too quiet, even for the lazy boy he was.

"What happened?"

"I can't tell you. Because you're a bitch."

He knew that phrase. Shikaku was fairly certain this was a nightmare, but felt compelled to probe the horror. There was a smell

about Shikamaru's clothing... He leaned back and saw the splash of blood across Shikamaru's chest. "Are you hurt?"

"I can't tell you. Because you're a bitch."

Shikaku noticed the kunai in his son's hand, still stained red, and felt his world fall apart.

(A/N John)

So this is the next installment of a very dark story. Standard torture and psyops behavior should be expected here. Expect to see conditioning and cheerful or polite murdering.

(A/N 2 John)

Spoon and I are just easily distracted right now and not having a lot of time to write anyway. The result of our lives is that we're having to cut short the time we normally spent writing. I suppose I could write without her, but it's just not the same.

(A/N 3 John)

Not sure there's much else to say here. I will clarify a bit:

Jokuro came later. Rei, Inna, and Kanza came first. He was created to be their sensei. Then things spiraled out of control. The three of them were broken to start with and then Jokuro got his hands on them.

Rei does not have a surname, because she was an unwanted orphan; Kanza is the last of his bloodline; Inna had a family name, but she was disposed from birth and disowned when she got her hive.

(A/N Spoon)

Because some people are wondering, the reason Jokuro is kept around is because he's an incredibly useful threat. He's known to be dangerous not just as an interrogator, but as a fighter on the battlefield. Keeping him alive means other villages are much less willing to risk sending in spies and such. Inoichi didn't push the issue further in the beginning because as far as he knew, Jokuro had broken contact with Ino. Then, when Jokuro took her to celebrate getting into the academy, he took precautions that as far as he knew worked perfectly. As for why Inoichi doesn't kill his brother? Jokuro is former ANBU. Inoichi is not. Nevermind the law, or not being able to kill his brother, he can't. The best he'd ever done was giving Jokuro his scar.